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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to define the terms "vague" and "ambiguous" and then argues that the problem of doublespeak revolves around the deliberate use of ambiguity, not vagueness. Through several situational examples, doublespeak is defended as a sometimes useful tactic in order to stimulate and encourage open inquiry and openmindedness on the part of individual communicators. Imprecision for the purpose of allowing movement of position between polarized opponents or within a single individual is supported. (TS)

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THE CASE FOR DOUBLESPEAK

William Carmack

All students of the communication process are aware of the imprecision inherent in the use of symbols by human beings in the attempt to convey meaning. One possible definition of interpersonal communication is: "The replication of memory images held by one person in another person or persons." As is true of all definitions of communication, even if we limit ourselves to human or interpersonal communication, much is left out and much is debatable. Nevertheless, I find this definition temporarily convenient because it highlights the inherent imprecision in the communication process. Indeed it suggests that we are limited by our experiences, either direct or vicarious, in both encoding and decoding messages. Thus it follows that, just as no two fingerprints are completely identical, no two sets of experience will have built the same memory bank in any two individuals. Because of this there is a kind of inadvertent doublespeak in any human communication attempt. However, it is clear that this basic and obvious fact is not intended to be the prime focus of this session.

We are concerned at the moment, not with the inherent weakness in symbolizing, so much as the introduction of deliberate imprecision into an already fallible system. Recently students of communication have chosen to distinguish this deliberate introduction of imprecision as either ambiguity or vagueness. I propose in the remaining minutes of this presentation to survey very briefly some recent research in this area and to attempt a rationale or, if you like, a defense for deliberate doublespeak or the calculated introduction

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of vagueness and ambiguity in human communication events.

Of course in the context of 1984 it is difficult for an academic person committed to as much rationality in decision-making as possible to make a strong defense. Another option is to define the concept of doublespeak so affirmatively as to beg the question of its valid use. I am hoping to accomplish the optimistic happy middle between defending the morally reprehensible and simply joining the side of the angels. If we take doublespeak to mean the calculated and deliberate introduction of vagueness and ambiguity in a communication situation, then I think we can make a reasonable case that under certain conditions and in certain situations this practice does not in fact short-circuit rational processes, but instead may well encourage them.

A number of researchers in recent years have found it convenient to distinguish between vagueness and ambiguity in describing communication behavior. In essence, the term vagueness is used to describe a referent which is highly abstract or imprecise and the term ambiguity is used to describe a referent susceptible to alternative specific interpretations. In the paper delivered in 1971 to the Western Speech Association Convention, Blaine Goss illustrated the difference between these terms:

> ". . . if I say "the range was expensive" you will probably think of an appliance. If I say "the item was expensive" you can use any item you can think of and still make sense of the sentence. The word "range" is ambiguous. The word "item" is vague. The immediate sentence context may help remove the ambiguity but it may not clear away the vagueness."

Typically, ambiguity is a phenomenon that functions primarily on the receiver of a communication message. A speaker may knowingly or unknowingly elicit differential meanings from common terms which have for him a clear reference. Thus the sentence "We are getting feedback" could mean to an electrical

engineer that we have a faulty amplification sound system or it could mean to a student of communication that we are sensitive to the reception of our message. It is probable that the speaker of this sentence would have a clear reference in mind although alternative interpretations are available to the receiver. On the other hand, in the context of vagueness a specific reference may not be available either to the source or receiver of communication. B.K. Darnell in a paper delivered in 1967 to the Speech Association of America cited the term "middle age" as an example of vagueness. Both source and receiver would attach meaning to this term but there is no reason to beleive that there would be any substantial agreement on the specific age comprehended by this term.

Accepting these definitions, then, the problem of doublespeak revolves around the deliberate use of ambiguity, not vagueness. As we have suggested there is an element of unintentional vagueness in any human communication event. But, ambiguity represents an attempt on the part of the source to make alternative meanings available to the receiver. Herein it seems to me lies the practical and ethical question of doublespeak.

Professional communicators have assumed that deliberate ambiguity is inherently wrong. This point of view is reflected in an article published March 9, 1974 in the Saturday Review/World by Fred Hechinger which was reprinted in the Doublespeak Newsletter, Spring 1974, of the National Council of Teachers of English. Among Hechingers complaints are: "government bureaus for instance have been instructed to eliminate the word poverty from official documents replacing it with low income, a term not nearly as alarming as poverty." Laying aside the question of why either term is "alarming," what commends the term poverty as a description of economic status over low income? Indeed, if

we were discussing economic status it may well be low income is more descriptive of an individuals situation than is poverty. Later in the same article, Mr. Hechinger draws upon an example from his own young sons educational experience" in a more recent approach our older sons fifth grade class two years ago produced a play composed entirely of fragments of nursery rhymes. . . I suggest that the term "our" is inaccurate and confusing unless one understands the traditional "editorial we" or the use by writer of "our" when "my" is intended. Apparently it is difficult for the serious opponents of doublespeak to avoid the vagueness and ambiguity which they oppose.

On the other hand there appear to be numerous occasions in which vagueness or ambiguity may be desirable. Let us consider the area of conflict resolution. When labor and management come to a complete standstill in negotiation and outside arbitrators become involved, typically one of their first tasks is to create an area of ambiguity which will allow room for reconsideration and compromise on the part of either or both parties. Usually by the time federal concilators become involved each side has made its demands and its positions so crystal clear that there is little room for confusion or reinterpretation on the part of the other party. The two partisans are polarized and there appears little hope that any major confession from either party will be forthcoming. A number of years ago Major Charles Estes of the Federal Mediation and Concilation Service developed what he called the "deep freeze" technique in which he sought to introduce topics sufficiently abstract and remote from the urgent issues at hand that the hostile parties could begin a dialogue without necessary polarization. From these rather innocuous topics he proceeded carefully to "thaw" the controversial issues in a context that would permit some modification of previous positions. These kinds of situations

seem to me to illustrate the value of doublespeak as a technique for providing in conflict situations an opportunity to avoid firm commitment and absolute polarity.

Perhaps a better example of the utility of doublespeak is the situation of a political campaign. Political campaigns are quite likely to dwell on issues far too much and inadvertently mislead the general public into a simplistic view of the process of representation. What we should be attempting to do as voters is find an individual who has a general political philosophy compatible with ours and the intellectual integrity and rigor to apply that philosophy as best he can to the thousands of specific issues which will arise in his term of service and require a yes or no type decisions. To be sure, some such issues are always pending during a campaign and it is tempting to simply measure the stated views of the various candidates against our personal biases and feel that we are performing an act of intellectual competence by supporting that individual who happens to most closely reflect our thinking on a majority of the issues or a few issues critical to us. This has the advantage of making us as voters feel that we have been objective and analytical in our approach to the hurly-burly of a political campaign.

The problem is that too often the issues involved in the campaign are either resolved by the time the candidate who wins is sworn into office or are handled by another tribuna. A personal example comes to mind: I worked closely with former United States Senator Fred R. Harris in his bid for the vacated seat of the late Robert S. Kerr of Oklahoma in 1964. One of Senator Kerr's last important pieces of legislation was the so-called Kerr-Mills Bill, a medical care plan which was designed with Senator Kerr's constituency in

mind and was working effectively in Oklahoma although not really operational in many of the states. In the context of the campaign, it became absolutely necessary for Senator Harris to endorse the Kerr-Mills approach to medical care in the light of the enormous commitment the Oklahoma constituency held for it. In his first session of United States Senator, Senator Harris faced a vote on the current Medicare Bill. After reflecting its advantages nationally, he became convinced that the Kerr-Mills approach, while thoroughly acceptable in Oklahoma, was probably not in the best interest of the nation. However, having made a public commitment in clear and unambiguous terms he was forced to vote negatively on a bill in which he believed one could easily raise the question of the ethics of voting for a position which one does not hold but for him and for most public figures the overriding ethical question was consistency with prior commitments. Thus had the voters of the state been less demanding of clarity and more tolerant of ambiguity, their senator could have represented them in Washington with a good bit more freedom for deliberation than was possible.

The two above examples are intended to suggest that clarity rather than ambiguity can often foreclose deliberation and make reasonable compromise difficult or impossible.

Vagueness, as we have noted suggests a lack of precise meaning either to the source or to the receiver in a communication situation. This too can have benefits. We all know that language is our chief tool for categorizing and classifying our experiences and the objects with which we deal. Having found a verbal category, we are typically proned to note the similarities of objects within that category. Consider a situation in which a patient approaches

a psychiatrist or a clinical psychologist with an undiagnosed emotional disturbance. Since there is considerable overlap in syndromes of behavior thought to be abnormal, the psychiatrist begins the relationship with an almost infinite range of diagnostic choices. If in the very early stages of analysis he decides in his own mind and writes a memorandum to his files that he is dealing with a manic depressive psychotic, he has probably in the act of labeling narrowed radically his range of diagnostic choices. Vagueness such as "the patient appears disturbed and in need of further therapy" might well have left his professional training a broader spectrum of operation.

We could go on endlessly with examples in which it is beneficial to individuals to be imprecise for the purpose of allowing movement of position between polarized opponents or within a single individual and I am certain that we can all draw similar examples from our daily experiences. To sum up, we are not defending imprecision as a tactic to avoid rational processes but we are suggesting that ambiguity and vagueness (imprecision) are frequently useful tactics in order to stimulate and encourage open inquiry and indeed openmindedness on the part of individual communicators. There are very few absolutes in the world and the sentence "Doublespeak is bad" is not one of them.